# Thai Culture in Brief

by Sujit Punyanubhab

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## 1. Historical Background of the country and people

The Word "Thai" means "free" and therefore "Thailand" means "the Land of the Free"

Formerly conflicting opinions and theories prevailed as to the origins of the Thais. Even in two decades before this we could speak with more certainty that they originated in Northwestern Szechuan of China about 4,500 years ago. But after the discovery of many instruments and artifacts at the village of Ban Chiang, Nongkarn District, Udornthani Province, the theory about the origins of Thai people have been changed into a new one. It might be that the Thai people settled down here in Thailand and then scattered to various parts of the world even to some parts of China. This was due to the 14 Carbon test of Artifacts which showed that Thailand might be the first place of Bronze Age ever discovered in any part of the world, for it has some artifacts older than what was unearthed in the Near East by about 500 years.

"Siam" was the name of the country well known to the world until 1939 and again between 1945 and 1949, then on May 11, 1949 there was a proclamation changing the name of the country into "Prathet Thai" or "Thailand"

2. Six Major periods of the Thai History

1. Ancient period. 4500 years ago when the Thai people settled down in north western Szechuan and scattered in the fan like manner along the valley of the ~~yangste~~ Yangtse River.

2. Nanchao Period 588 years (650-1238) The kingdom was situated in Yünnan in the Southern part of China.

3. Sukhothai period 128 years (1238-1350) Sukhothai was the first capital city when the Thai people moved and settled down in the northern part of Siam overcoming the Khmers' influence. There were 6 kings altogether of "Pra Ruang" dynasty during the period of 128 years.

4. Ayudhya Period 417 years (1350-1767) With the new dynasty. Ayudhya was the first capital city ~~of~~ situated in the central part of Siam. There were 34 kings of various dynasties during the 417 years.

5. ~~Dhon~~ Dhonburi Period - only 15 years (1767-1782). After the fall of Ayudhya, King Tak Sin established Dhonburi the new capital on the west bank of Chao Phraya River opposite to Modern Bangkok.

6. Bangkok or Ratanakosin Period began in 1782. Bangkok has been established the present capital City of Thailand under the reigns of nine successive Kings of Chakri dynasty for 190 years to this day.

## Thai Culture

The word 'culture' means 'way of life" or "Social heritage." It embraces all forms of human response to environments. Different meaning between culture and civilization is that culture includes all aspects of way of life whether they may be primitive or modern ones while civilization means only "The stage of being brought out of barbarism or the advanced stage in social development".

Culture may be divided into various aspects as follows:

Linguistic, Aesthetic, Customary and Traditional, material culture and spiritual culture.

Linguistic culture - means language including reading and writing process. The Thai language is of monosyllable. In writing and in speaking it has music tones to denote different meanings of the same word as klai, if pronounced differently means near but if in another way means far.

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Another word is 'Sua', it can be pronounced in three different ways meaning tiger, a mat and a coat. In writing we have ~~some~~ same symbols above the written word to guide the reading. Thailand has her own characters including figures, compared with England which uses Roman characters and Arabic figures.

Aesthetic Culture — means harmony, beauty and sweetness of what was made and ~~invested~~ invented by human beings. The word 'fine arts' includes painting, ~~sclr~~ sculpture, architecture, drama and music. The Thai paintings of Ancient time discovered at a Southern province of Thailand, Yala, were dated between the 10th and 13th centuries. The first fairly well preserved painting has been discovered at Ayuthya ancient monastry which was founded in 1424 A.D.

The Thai sculpture is mostly the arts of forming the images of the Buddha. It is of five periods:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Chiangsaen period | - | 11th _ 13th | century A.D. |
| Sukho Thai " | | - 13th - 15th | " " " |
| U - Thong " | | = 13th - 15th | " " " |
| Ayuthya " | | = 1350 - 1767 | " " |
| Ratanakosin or Bangkok " | : | 1782 - 1868 | A.D. |

The Thai ~~art~~ architecture besides making residential houses is mostly connected with royal palace and monastery buildings and pagodas which are of their own typical structure as may be seen in Bangkok.

The Thai drama is of many kinds such as Khon or the masked play, Lakhon Nok (Played by both men and Women) Lakhon Nai (played by women only) and so on. Thai Classic dances are mostly some parts of dramatic entertainments.

The Thai music instruments are of four kinds: the instrument of flipping or snapping, drawing, percussion and woodwind.

Another kind of Thai art is the inlaid work of the mother-of-pearl used to decorate window and door panels of the shrine hall in the monastery and some utensils.

Customary and traditional culture of Thailand is mostly on the basis of human relation and Buddhism, such as when the sun enters the Zodiac of Aries generally on April 13 every year. The Thai people celebrate Songkran Festival by paying respect to their parents, old relatives, pouring water and perfumes into their hands and

in return their parents and old relatives will utter some words of blessing for their happiness and prosperity. Besides this they go to the nearest monastery paying homage to Buddhist monks, venerating and pouring water and perfumes at the image of the Buddha as a kind of worship, freeing birds and fish as a gift of freedom and life and finally dedicating meritorious parts to the departed ancestors ( श्राद्ध? ) Various kinds of entertainments will follow after that.

Modesty. paying respect to the parents, the elders, the teachers and Buddhist monks, accepting and following admonition of parents and teachers are cultural structure of the Thai custom and tradition.

Speaking of Thai spiritual culture, we cannot leave Buddhism aside because Buddhism has played its important roles in the way of life of the Thai people from Sukhothai period (700 years ago) up till now.

There have been some statements in the stone inscriptions of Sukhothai period as may be quoted in essence as follows:

" Good are the Sukhothai people. They are of generous and moral habits, always observing precepts and giving alms. The people of this ~~It~~ Sukhothai, old and young, male and female, all of them are pious, cherishing their faith in Buddhism, each observing precepts during the rainy season. After the ~~E~~ Lent, the Kathin (The ceremony of saffron robe presentation) is observed for a period of one month."

The Thai people who addhere to various faiths as shown in percentage by the office of national Statistics are as follows:

| | |
|---|---|
| Buddhists | 93.6 |
| Muslim | 3.9 |
| Christians | 0.6 |
| others | 1.9 |

There are more than 300,000 Buddhist monks and novices and more than 25,000 Buddhist monasteries throughout the Country

There are two Buddhist Universities and about 7000 schools

for Buddhist educations run by ecclesiastical authorities. These schools and universities do not include the more than 10,000 schools for boys and girls which are situated in the monasteries.

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Complexity in the Thai Religious System: An Interpretation

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Complexity has characterized the Thai religious system since atleast 1292, when the well known inscription of Rama Kamhaeng was composed. (A. B. Griswold & Prasert Na Nagara, "The Inscription of King Rama Gamhen of Sukhodaya (1292 A.D), Journal of the Siam Society. LIX (1971), PP 179-228, is the most recent translation of this inscription. it includes a discussion of previous translations.) This inscription not only celebrates the devotion of his people of Sukhothai to theravada Buddhism but also notes a special relationship between the prosperity of the kingdom and reverence for Phra-Khaphung, a "spirit-deity" living in a nearby mountain. Phra Khaphung is characterized as a phi-thewada, combining phi (an indigenous Thai form meaning "spirit" "ghost") with thewada (a form derived from Hindu Buddhist cosmology and meaning "deity"). This classification of Phra Khaphung suggests that a process of merging two once distinct religious traditions had already begun.

The co-existence of indigenous and non-indigenous elements in thai religion has persisted throughout subsequent thai history. For example, when Rama I sought to reestablish order after the Burmese sack of the capital of Ayutthaya in 1767, one of his first decrees listed the various

types of "spirits" (Phī) and "deities" (thewadā) that might legitimately be honoured by sacrifices. However, the King reminded his subjects that good fortune and affliction alike ultimately result from "Karma", not from the actions of spirits of gods. He emphasized that the Triple Gems of Buddhism were higher than all other laws, and that no other religious precepts could be held superior to those of Buddhism. (This decree, issued on 21st Aug. 1782, is cited in H.R.H. Chula Chakrabongse, Lords of Life; The Paternal Monarchy of Bangkok, 1782-1932. (London: Redman 1960), p. 89. See also R. Lingat (ed.), Pramuan kotmai ratchakan thi nyng (Legal Codes of King Rama I), Bangkok: Thammasat University, 1938.)

Observers of the current Thai religious situation, rural or urban, have noted that Thai religion still manifests similar complexity. (B. J. Terwiel, "A model for the study of Thai Buddhism" [hereafter MSTB].

This intricate mix of indigenous and non-indigenous elements is not the religious pluralism of the west, a situation in which tolerance exists for a competition among a number of distinct and autonomous faiths for the religious adherence of the populace. Thai religious complexity is of the sort commonly characterized as syncretic, in which elements derived from several historically discrete traditions have combined

to form a single distinctive Tradition. In such a situation, individuals may simultaneously hold beliefs or practice rituals derived from different Traditions, without any apparent sense of incongruity.

The Thai share this situation of religious complexity with other South and Southeast Asian peoples who commonly identify themselves as Theravada Buddhists: the peoples of Sri Lanka, Burma, Cambodia, and Laos. In fact it has frequently been observed that Theravada Buddhism is never the sole religious component in these societies, that there are invariably "non Buddhist" religious elements present as well, leading H-D. Evers to suggest that Theravada Buddhism is, in some sense, an "incomplete" religion. At any rate, the fact of religious complexity in Theravada Buddhist societies has been a matter of interest for some time. And two broad strategies have been used to investigate it: one approach might be characterized as historical, the other as a more synchronic structural-functional or social science approach.

The historical approach to understanding Thai religion is exemplified by the efforts of such scholars as K. Landon and R. Le May. They distinguished the various elements that make up Thai religion, principally by identifying their historical origin — e.g.

indigenous - animist. Brahmanic, Buddhist. These constituent elements were further identified with the various epochs in Thai history in which they were assumed to have been first adopted by the Thai. This approach has often produced what might be called the "stratigraphic" and the 'thin veneer' perspectives. Thai (or ~~Sian~~ Sinhalese, Burmese, etc) religion is seen as made up of a number of discrete "layers" of religious belief and practice, one piled haphazardly on the other. The practitioners of this approach seem to have assumed that religion is intrinsically irrational. But they also seem to have been impressed with the apparent persistence of indigenous - animistic elements, which suggested to them that the non - indigenous religious elements formed a thin veneer over the basically animistic propensities of the nominally Buddhist masses (i.e scratch a Buddhist; find an animist) emphasizing historical origins, followers of this approach have generally left unexplored a number of questions about the relationships between the various religious elements, questions of special interest to the followers of the other approach to religous complexity

The main aims of the Structural-functional approach have been to investigate the relationships among the various religious components found in Theravada Buddhist societies, and/or to discover any social correlates of religious beliefs and practices in the nonreligious sphere of these societies. This approach is ~~favored~~ favored by most contemporary anthropologists and other social scientists interested in Theravada Buddhism. Although none of the scholars who have pursued the structural-functional approach has ignored the historical depth of Theravada Buddhism, or the religious and non-religious spheres of the societies they have studied, their primary aim has been a synchronic analysis that is, they have sought to demonstrate relationships between the various religious components, or between the religious and nonreligious spheres independent of the historical contexts in which they are found. The structural-functional approach has been extremely productive, highlighting agreements on such matters as the primacy of Buddhism in these complex religious systems. It has also produced some disagreements of interpretation - such as whether we can see a single syncretized religious system or a number of distinct and alternative religious systems.

This is well illustrated in the works of M. Ames and M. Spiro. In their studies of Sinhalese and Burmese religion, respectively, Ames and Spiro each distinguish two components: A Theravada Buddhist component and a non-Theravada Buddhist "component. Ames labels his non-Buddhist component "magical-animism". Spiro prefers "supernaturalism" or simply "animism." Although both recognize a degree of internal complexity in each of the two components, apparently the Buddhist one has been

identified through a number of unambiguous criteria, while the non-Buddhist one seems to have a residual character. That is, any religious element not identifiable as "Buddhist" is classed as "non Buddhist" or animist. Given this distinction, Ames and Spiro conclude that Buddhism maintains a paramount position with Sinhalese, Burmese religion. But they disagree on the relationship between the two components, on whether there is a single integrated religious system or multiple – and perhaps antagonistic – systems. Ames sees in Sinhalese religion a functional division of labor between Buddhism and magical animism: the Buddhist component specializing in ultimate and other-worldly concerns, the magical-animist component in more mundane this-worldly matters. He also proposes that the magical-animist component performs key socialization and therapeutic functions for the adherents of Buddhism, linking both components into a single religious system. Spiro sees a similar division in Burmese religion: Buddhism being concerned with the supermundane, and animism with the mundane. But he maintains that Buddhism and Burmese supernaturalism do not form a single syncretized religious system. Though he does see Buddhism as paramount, Spiro proposes that Buddhism and animism each

represent distinct and - to some extent - alternative religious systems".

Terwiel has recently suggested that some of the differences in interpretation respecting religious complexity in those societies where we find Theravada Buddhism may be due to differences in theoretical perspective. Certainly Ames and Spiro represent different theoretical preferences within anthropology - a sociological emphasis and a psychological emphasis, respectively. However, some of the differences recorded seem to be due to the unique historical situations of the societies under consideration. For example, caste considerations play some role in Sinhalese religion, while caste has not been a factor in most Southeast Asian religions. Other differences also exist. For example, the relative stress placed on novicehood in Burmese religion seems to contrast with the stress on monkhood in Sri Lanka and Thailand.

One problem in the study of those societies in which Theravada Buddhism is found is the temptation to treat both Buddhism and Buddhist society as single enduring entities that can be abstracted from the flux of particular social life. In fact, such an approach can be useful. But we can also view Buddhism and Buddhist society as variables, conditioned by the circumstances in which they are found - including the non-Buddhist religious elements invariably found with Buddhism, and the historical circumstances of each

Buddhist Society. From this perspective, the Religious systems in which Buddhism plays a dominant role, and the Societies in which these religious systems are found, represent a range of variations rather than a single entity. Such an approach may allow us to see relationships within and between both the complex religious systems and the societies influenced by Theravada Buddhism. It may also pave the way for a truly comparative study of Theravada Buddhism as a living religion of its impact on the lives of real people rather than sociological abstractions. It is in this context that I shall sketch out a perspective on Thai religious complexity which may reveal similarities to and differences from other Theravada Buddhist Societies. That is, the Thai situation viewed as part of a range of variation found in Theravada Buddhist Societies.

The Thai case is similar to those of Sri Lanka and Burma in that Buddhism maintains a paramount position within a complex religious situation. However I distinguish three components in Thai religion (rather than the two of Ames and Spiro) Buddhism, a Brahmanistic component, and an animistic component. Each will be examined along a number of dimensions: goal orientation and world-view, ritual, specialists, participants, and social focus. I shall indicate some of the ways these three components

are interrelated to form a perduring pattern; hence my concern is primarily structural-functional. However I shall also set out an historical perspective in which the formation and development of this pattern may be viewed, and suggest some ways this pattern has undergone changes in recent years.

## Theravada Buddhism in Thai religion

Rama Kamhaeng's inscription is only one of many that indicate that by the thirteenth century the Thai had established a number of powerful states in the area now part of northern Thailand. These inscriptions also indicate that Theravada Buddhism occupied a prominent place in these states, although the specific agencies through which the Thai first encountered Buddhism are not completely clear. From the fourteenth century on, the major center of Thai power shifted southward to Ayutthaya, which was influenced in important respects by the hinduized Khmer, especially after the Thai conquest of Angkor in the late fourteenth century. Despite these Khmer influences, however, Buddhism retained its paramount position in the Ayutthayan religious system. In the eighteenth century a further southward shift in Thai power took place, centering it on Bangkok. Rama I's inscription reiterates - at the very foundation of what was to become the modern Thai state - the centrality of Buddhism to the Thai. In contemporary Thailand, Buddhism is recognized as the state religion and enjoys special government support, although recent constitutions have guaranteed freedom of religion. The Thai King must be a Buddhist, to maintain his role as defender of the faith. The official sanction of Buddhism merely formalizes and affirms the

Commitments and attitudes of the Thai people generally. For them there is close link between being Thai and being Buddhist.

Theravada Buddhism maintains its unity and continuity through a common core of doctrines and rituals sustained and perpetuated by the monastic institution (the Sangha). Some generalizations about sophisticated Buddhism might well apply to any Buddhist society. I will argue that, in Thai Society, the values and beliefs of Buddhism are not restricted to a small group of virtuosos and literati but influence the mass of Thai. These values and beliefs set the religious context that has shaped the institutional fabric of Thai society and in which the Thai live their every day lives. Buddhist values, conceptions, and attitudes color virtually all aspects of Thai life, pervading the Thai attitude toward the world in which they live.

## Buddhist Goal Orientations & World view.

Philosophical Buddhism postulates two levels of reality: one, the phenomenal world of every day experience, a world of ignorance and illusion; the other, the world of the Karmically conditioned, the domain of ultimate religious reality. It should be noted that these two levels of reality are not completely distinct and separate worlds; they are two perspectives on the <u>same</u> world. These two perspectives on reality are based in a number of key Buddhist doctrines, in particular those of Karma and of multiple rebirth. <u>Karma</u> holds that each act carries its own load of religious merit (Bun – บุญ) and / or demerit (bāp – บาป) which automatically accrues to the actor. Multiple rebirth postulates that one works out the implications of his merits and demerits over a long series of lifetimes. Buddhism also locates the religious causes of suffering and of evil in action in the world, action motivated by

desire and attachment to worldly things. Since the causes of suffering are located in the world, the aim of the Buddhist is to free himself from desire and attachment, to escape from the world, to gain nirvana or "extinction." The formal goal of escaping from the cluches of Karma is the basis for characterizing Buddhism as radically other worldly.

In Thailand, as in other Buddhist societies, knowledge of sophisticated doctrines and striving to attain Nirvana are restricted to extremely dedicated monks and possibly a few laymen. Though Buddhists, most Thai do not aspire to such an abstract religious goal as nirvana. The mass of Thai Buddhists aspire to a more proximate version of the ultimate goal, a sojourn in paradise (sawan- สวรรค์) and/or an enhanced status in some future life. Such aspirations may appear to savor of a this-worldly attitute, but they should not be viewed as simple inversions of the other worldly thrust of Buddhist thought. A time in paradise or an enhanced rebirth status are deemed to be appropriate rewards for proper behavior, rewards that signify one is moving along the path to the more difficult and abstract ultimate goal. Such pervasive and popular tales as the Phra Wedsandon Chadok (Vessantara Jataka) not only provide lay Buddhists with exemplars of proper modes of behavior involving renunciation and compassion; they also serve to remind them that their religious life is a long and difficult journey worked out over a series of lifetimes with numerous stopping points. The main point of articulation between a Thai lay person and Buddhist values and beliefs is not through such esoteric doctrines as Karma, or even such formulations as the Four Noble Truths or Eightfold Path. Most Thai are linked to Buddhism through popular beliefs about 'merit' (bun) and the pervasive ritual system connected with these beliefs, 'merit-making' (tham bun).

Ideas about merit and merit-accumulation seem to be ubiquitous in Thailand; individuals frequently account for events and experiences in their lives in terms of their relative store of merit; all individuals, situations, and events can — potentially, at least — be interpreted and

[illegible] make up the individual.

Though Folk Brahmanism draws on many salient features of the Buddhist world-view, there is one important aspect in which it differs from Buddhism: its aims or goals. In contrast to the other-worldly orientation encouraged by Buddhism (in ultimate terms escape from karma, achieving extinction; more proximately gaining paradise or an enhanced rebirth), Folk Brahman practice is more commonly directed to this-worldly problems, the ceremonies aiming at such ends as good health, prosperity, success in some undertaking, or a happy and auspicious marriage. Folk Brahman practices also come into play at various points in the life cycle and in the cycle of the seasons. Despite the apparent incongruity between the this-worldly focus of Folk Brahman practice and the other-worldly focus of Buddhism, these foci are not in opposition but are closely intertwined.

## Folk Brahman Ritual

Folk Brahmanism has no distinctive and coherent world-view which distinguishes it from Buddhism; its beliefs and practices are [illegible] based in conceptions and ideas derived from Buddhism. In this sense, Folk Brahmanism does not constitute a separate and autonomous religious system vis-a-vis Buddhism, but rather consists of a number of individual ritual complexes that can be related to Buddhist values and beliefs. Because of its close links with Buddhism, and the nature of its practice, Folk Brahmanism [illegible], it might be seen as a kind of "secular" or this-worldly arm of Buddhism proper.

Just as Buddhist rituals are assumed to be automatically efficacious in producing merit, Folk Brahman rituals are also believed to be automatically effective. That is, given the proper conditions (e.g. the client having correct information regarding date and time of birth, the ceremony being performed properly), the desired result or correct advice will follow; any apparent failures are attributed to erroneous information supplied or improper procedure followed or possibly lack of skill of the particular specialist employed. Since successful performances are likely to be remembered, and any failures forgotten or explained away, faith in the effectiveness of Folk Brahman ceremonies is rarely challenged. There are numerous highly specialized tasks which Folk Brahman ceremonies may address. However there are two general ritual tasks which seem especially important. The first might be characterized as legitimating this-worldly involvements; the second involves a therapeutic function.

follows. In contrast to the achieved and universalistic features of the Buddhist and Folk Brahman religious roles, there are ascriptive and particularistic elements involved in becoming a spirit-doctor. For example, it is believed that becoming a spirit-doctor is not voluntary, as it is with monks, laymen and khwan doctors. A spirit "chooses" a woman who is familiar, and coerces her by threat of illness and even death. Some spirit-doctors claim that despite these threats, they held off the spirit's call until too weak to resist. Some also believe that spirits show a fondness for women who are related, e.g., sisters, mother and daughter, aunt and niece. Taking on a Buddhist and Folk Brahman role typically involves some measure of learning of chants, techniques, or other lore; by contrast popular belief has it that the spirit-being gives all necessary skills to the spirit-doctor, so no learning is involved on her part.

Occasionally several spirit-doctors may come together to perform a ceremony at which they collectively "feed" their spirits (liang phi). But primarily, spirit-doctors act as individuals; they do not form a distinctive organization or group which acts to elaborate and perpetuate a distinctive animist ideology or world-view, as does the Sangha for Buddhism. The perpetuation of animist beliefs and practices relies primarily on the maintenance of popular beliefs about the significance, functions and importance of spirits. In this regard the animist component of Thai religion benefits from the fact that Buddhist cosmology and belief has included spirits as a part of its formal and popular belief system.

Participants and Social Focus

Being a spirit-doctor is a part-time specialty, providing services to clients when needed. Except for the spirit-doctors, involvement with animist elements is intermittent and generally of low intensity; and support is not routinely maintained. The main instance of collective involvement with animist elements is ceremonies directed to the propitiation of the village tutelary spirits (Intriguingly, the individual in charge of this ceremony, the cao cam phi puta, is a man, in contrast to the dominance of females in other animist roles). A few generalizations can be made about who is likely to encounter spirits in his or her life. Women, children, and those with weak khwan are likely objects of the spirit's attention; and the period around childbirth is especially dangerous for both mother and child. The impoverished are more likely to be involved in animist activities than the well-to-do; and less accessible regions are likely to have a higher incidence of animist elements than more accessible areas. In general,

where Buddhist and/or Folk Brahman involvement and activities are high, animist involvement and activity is likely to be low.

In contrast to the respect accorded Buddhist and Folk Brahman features, though there is little overt hostility, considerable ambivalence is expressed about the entire animist domain, even by those most deeply involved in it. With the exception of the person in charge of the cult of the tutelary spirit, most animist practitioners have little respect or prestige among their fellows. There are clearly deep-seated cleavages between animistic elements and Buddhism and Folk Brahmanism. In many respects, animism stands in symbolic opposition to that which Buddhism values most highly: asceticism, self-control and predictability. The superior potency of Buddhism over animistic threats is taken as axiomatic by Thai. Monks are held to be immune from spirit attacks; and Buddhist symbols, chants, holy water and inscriptions may be used to overcome malevolent spirits or to exorcise them. Indeed, some claim the spirits cannot harm any truly devout Buddhists, lay or monk. However, since Buddhist cosmology itself affirms the existence of the spirit-order, there is no doubt about the phenomenal reality of spirits (except, possibly, among the most sophisticated).

In contrast to the society-wide focus of Buddhism and the more regional aspect of Folk Brahmanism, animism tends to be highly localized; malevolent spirits and spirit-doctors operate within a narrowly restricted region. Hence animist elements display a wider range of variability in beliefs and practices throughout Thailand than either Buddhism or Folk Brahmanism, although similarities in form and pattern can be discerned. Insofar as animistic elements are effective, they tend to tie individuals to a specific locality, rather than bring them into a 'wider world' as do the others, Buddhism and Folk Brahmanism.

## Thai Religious Complexity: Comparisons and Contrasts

Before turning to the historical dimension of Thai religious complexity, it might be fruitful to summarize the analysis thus far. The previous discussion was not intended to be exhaustive, but rather to single out three major components that can be analytically distinguished in Thai religion: Theravada Buddhism, a Brahmanistic element with two facets, Court and Folk, and an animistic component. I will highlight similarities and differences between the components, and suggest how they are interrelated

to form a coherent Thai religious pattern. The comparisons and contrasts are summarized in Table I.

TABLE I Summary of Three Components of Thai Religion

| | Buddhism | Brahmanism | Animism |
|---|---|---|---|
| Goal orientation | other-worldly | this-worldly | this-worldly |
| World-view | determinate-certain | determinate-certain | capricious-uncertain |
| Ritual | standard-routine | standard-routine | individually-tailored |
| Specialists | predominantly-male | predominantly-male | predominantly female |
| Recruitment | universalistic achievement | universalistic achievement | particularistic ascription |
| Participants | laity | client | client |
| Involvement | constant | intermittent | intermittent |
| Attitude toward | highly favorable | favorable | ambivalent |
| Social focus | whole society | bridging locality & society | highly localized |

There are four important contrasts between Buddhism and other two components of Thai religion: Buddhism is oriented primarily to other-worldly goals; the entire populace serves as a laity for Buddhism; their support for and involvement in Buddhism is constant; and Buddhism's social focus encompasses the entirety of Thai society. Animism contrasts with the other components in five ways: an animist world-view involves capricious and unpredictable elements; spirit-practitioners tend to be women; such practitioners are recruited ascriptively and particularistically; animism is viewed with considerable ambivalence; and its social focus is local in scope. Folk Brahmanism appears to be interstitial between the Buddhist and animist components. As such, it does not present any distinctive features to contrast with those of the other two components, though it does share more features

in common with Buddhism than with animism.

The Buddhist and Brahmanistic components share several features: both involve a deterministic and predictable world-view; their rituals follow standardized forms and are thought to be automatically efficacious; specialists' roles are achieved and defined by universalistic standards; practitioners tend to be men; and attitudes toward both components are strongly positive. Though the social focus of Buddhism, relating to the entirety of Thai society (and beyond), is more inclusive than that of Brahmanism, the two are related. Folk Brahmanism serves to integrate regions and individuals into the Buddhist system and to stabilize the relationship.

Brahmanism and animism share the following features: both are oriented to mundane this-worldly matters; participation in both is on a client basis; and involvement in and support of both is intermittent. It should also be noted that Buddhism and animism appear mutually opposed on all dimensions considered here, and animism contrasts with both Buddhism and Brahmanism on several dimensions: its indeterminate and unpredictable world-view; the fluid structure of its rituals; predominance of women practitioners; particularistic and ascriptive features in recruitment of specialists; and the ambivalence toward animism generally.

On the basis of the preceding discussion, the pattern of Thai religious complexity might be characterized thus: Buddhism stands at the apex of the Thai religious system and forms a central part of Thai social values. Buddhism provides a coherent and integrated system of beliefs, practices and specialists, sustained by a codified orthodoxy, the Sangha, political authority, and the Thai masses. The Sangha perpetuates Buddhist values and beliefs, and stands as a proximate symbol and living embodiment of them. It is through the religious Sangha and Buddhist ritual system that these values are displayed to be internalized, in one form or another, by all Thai. Thereby, Buddhism penetrates all levels and sectors of Thai society. Buddhism provides the Thai with a unitary set of values and a common ritual and expressive language, uniting them in a larger Buddhist moral community that transcends particularistic and local loyalties and attachments.

Given the paramount position of Buddhism within the Thai religious pattern, both Brahmanist and animistic ~~patterns~~ components can be understood only in relation to Buddhism. In this regard, though Folk Brahmanism is made up of a [illegible]

imaged by animism is that of a part with the image of Buddhist order, for the latter is assumed always to prevail. Buddhist symbols are capable of exorcising the spirits, but spirits are ineffective against Buddhism. Even though Buddhist order ultimately prevails, there is always the possibility of animistic disorder breaking through. This possibility in fact provides a degree of tension release for those whom Buddhism places in a residual status or who occupy a disadvantaged position vis-a-vis Buddhism. Such considerations may help us to understand the free-floating quality of animistic elements in Thai religion, as well as the prominent place women have in animistic practice.

This effort to characterize a pattern of Thai religious complexity is undoubtedly oversimplified. However, it may provide a point of departure for a more intensive investigation of variability within Thai religion and for viewing Thai religion and society comparatively, as one part of a larger range of variability encompassing all those societies in which Theravada Buddhism is found. The pattern outlined above may also help us in examining fluctuations and shifts in Thai religion and society throughout history. It should not be taken to imply that Thai religion ever was, or is now, a neatly integrated and balanced homeostatic system which has persisted autonomously and without effort. There have been and continue to be tensions and strains within and between the various components of Thai religion, as well as in their articulation with other aspects of Thai society. For example, there is a kind of tension between Buddhism and animism which is built into the very fabric of Thai religion itself. Aside from this intrinsic tension, there undoubtedly have been others which can be discerned in the historical development of Thai religion and Thai society.

In the following section, I shall propose that an overall process of religious development can be discerned in the sweep of Thai history. I shall note several points where tension within Thai religion, or between religion and Thai society, seem to have occurred. Finally, I shall note some recent changes in Thai religion and society which may pose significant problems in the future.

## Historical Dimensions of Thai Religious Complexity

In the absence of a precisely detailed record of the development of Thai religion and society, I wish to draw on a theoretical perspective that can guide our speculations about that development — speculations which can then be checked against future historical research. The theoretical perspective was formulated by M. Marriott in his efforts to understand the relationship

between the Great and Little traditions of India. In India, Marriott sees the relationships as subsuming two distinct but complementary processes which he terms "universalization" and "parochialization". Applying these concepts to the development of Thai religion highlights an overall process of religious "upgrading", one involving the increasing Buddhization of Thai religion and society.

## Upgrading in Thai Religion

It is likely that, in their numerous contacts with the neighbouring Khmer, the pre-Buddhist Thai encountered a variety of Indianized religious ideas and institutions. Their own religious system was apparently animistic, one in which the spirits were the major figures. The Thai adoption of Theravada Buddhism during the 13th Cen. set the stage for the subsequent development of a distinctive Thai religious pattern and social order dominated by Buddhist values and ideas. My own speculation — based largely on the numerous close connections between these elements in contemporary Thai religion — is that the Buddhism adopted by the early Thai included some popular elements similar to, if not identical with, what I have termed Folk Brahmanism. However, as suggested in the previous discussion, there is a necessity for some sort of mediator between abstract Buddhism and the everyday-life problems of the ordinary Buddhist. Noting the contemporary Folk Brahman beliefs and rituals serve this function may help illuminate the common co-occurrence of purportedly non-Buddhist religious elements everywhere that Theravada Buddhism is found.

Ramkamhaeng's inscription suggests how a process of articulation between Buddhism and an indigenous Thai religion took place. Indigenous spirits (such as Phra Khaphung) were identified with various aspects of Buddhist cosmology and belief — e.g., as deities, spirits, demons, etc. A locality spirit might be identified with a more abstract Hindu-Buddhist entity like Mae Thorani, the goddess of the earth. Initially, such identifications of indigenous spirits with more abstract religious entities would involve a degree of parochialization. By conceptually identifying a proximate and familiar spirit with a distant and complex abstract and universal cosmology, the deity is made less abstract and more a part of the indigenous system of beliefs. But such identifications simultaneously involve a process of universalization. The familiar spirit, now identified with a more abstract and universal cosmological scheme, is upgraded to an entity more distant than previously.

Buddhist cosmology is broad enough to encompass virtually all aspects

was defeated by the forces of Taksin, who took over the Thai kingship. On the one hand, Taksin sought to restore the traditional religious and social order with the aid of Buddhist and Brahman experts; on the other hand, he expressed heterodox views which threatened that order. Among other things, he claimed extraordinary religious qualities and required that monks venerate him, reversing the traditional order of respect between monks and king.

Taksin was deposed and power was assumed by Rama I who also sought to restore the traditional pattern, emphasizing the preeminence of Buddhism while legitimating Brahmanist and animist elements. Rama I was more successful than Taksin, and his successors continued the process of elaborating and stabilizing the complex religious pattern, with Buddhism at the pinnacle. Rama IV, better known as King Mongkut, is another strategic figure. He initiated a series of religious and social reforms which helped set the mould for the modern Thai state, including an effort to upgrade the standards of the Thai Sangha, modifying certain royal ceremonies to conform more closely to Buddhist ideas of kingship, and the denigrating of numerous traditional beliefs about cosmology and astrology. Mongkut's reforms encouraged the Buddhaization process, and the thrust of his reforms was continued by his successors — particularly his son King Chulalongkorn, whose long reign (1688–1910) brought the Thai into the modern world.

## Changes in Modern Thai Religion and Society

King Chulalongkorn continued the religious and social reforms initiated by his father. For example, he formalized Mongkut's Sangha reforms by recognizing the Thammayut "reform" group as part of the larger Thai Sangha, in addition to the Mahanikai monks, who follow a more traditional mode of monastic discipline. Thammayut monks and temples subsequently spread throughout the kingdom, serving as exemplars of a more rigorous monastic discipline. Chulalongkorn also sought to rationalize the administrative structure of the kingdom, and he established the national secular school system. Traditionally education had been primarily religious, taking place within the temple. This new development meant, among other things, freed the monk to pursue his religious tasks more diligently if he chose to do so. Chulalongkorn also initiated the rationalization and centralization of the Sangha, paralleling the organization of the government. National standards were set for monks, and eventually Buddhist Universities were located in Bangkok to improve their training. More recently, the Central government has sought to involve the Sangha in national efforts to develop the country, and to use monks as religious ambassadors to non-Buddhist minorities in the kingdom.

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The overall thrust of the modern developments has been to emphasize the central position of Buddhism in Thai religion and society, and to elevate the level of religious

and the exigencies of everyday life. If the folk Brahman component were to disappear, abstract Buddhism would have to directly confront problems formerly met by this component of Thai religion: affirmation of the basic morality of the laity despite their involvement in the mundane world, legitimation of the formation of attachments in the world, and accounting for the moral implications of these. Perhaps this situation explains the apparent increasing interest in meditation on the part of Thai lay Buddhists (and monks). At any rate an unmediated confrontation between abstract Buddhism and the vicissitudes of everyday life may be a crucial test of the vitality of Thai religion, a test that holds both threat and promise.

Historical and contemporary evidence suggests that the animistic component of Thai religion has also undergone deep alteration, as Thai religion and society have been increasingly Buddhaized. Since certain aspects commonly attributed to animism (e.g., the very notion of phī) are also included in traditional Buddhist cosmologies, such items are not likely to disappear. If the animistic component provides a kind of symbolic opposition to the Buddhist world-view, its perpetuation is linked closely to the perpetuation of Buddhism. And, if animistic elements provide a measure of tension release from the stringent demands on the individual, it might even be that animistic manifestations could actually increase as the tensions of living in the modern world also increase.

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H. H. Prince Dhani Nivat, A History of Buddhism in Siam, Bangkok: Siam Society, 1965, provides a useful historical overview of Buddhism in Thailand.

31. For example, various "Brahman" figures were prominent in the procession that carried the King in circumambulation of the old city walls in Bangkok, on the occasion of his 36th birthday in 1963. The first ploughing ceremony is still performed in Bangkok, though today it has become more of a tourist spectacular than a national ritual; E. Young, The Kingdom of the Yellow Robe (Westminster: Constable, 1898), p.64 f., 78 f. notes the popularity of such Brahman ceremonies as the tonsure ceremony, though such ceremonies have by now virtually disappeared among the public. However, the modern wedding ceremony followed in Bangkok has much Brahman symbolism. (e.g., pouring lustral water from a conch shell onto a bridal couple).